

Book Review

Bitter Sweets: A Review of Alfie Bown's *Enjoying It: Candy Crush and Capitalism*

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Enjoying It takes its place in a tradition of critical works that expose the functioning of ideology in the production of culture and in mediating our everyday cultural and habitual experiences, works such as those found within the oeuvres of Benjamin, Žižek and Barthes which Bown cites in this book. This tradition is perhaps defined by the various attempts of each thinker to situate aesthetics within its social and material context, or, in a similar manner, to include questions of content within analysis of form.

That Bown's project is motivated by such concerns is clear from the statement 'the point is not so much that society tells us what to enjoy (though it does), but that it tells us *to enjoy per se*'. From the manner in which this book addresses the academy as well the casual reader of critical theory, *Enjoying It* can be viewed as a polemic work with the aim of elevating critical analysis of acts of consumption and the subjectivity of the consumer to the level which other forms of textual analysis occupy within the academy. While this bifurcated polemic produces language that is at times obscure and at times imprecise, Bown makes an important polemic contribution that updates the critical tradition for our modern age.

Enjoying It begins with a meandering and somewhat counter-intuitive discussion of the relationship between critical theory and enjoyment, the role of which is not entirely clear until it is read in light of Bown's invocation of Lacan's

“analyst discourse” from his 17th seminar, which stands for ‘systematic resistance to oppressive power structures’.

In...the analyst’s discourse, it is enjoyment (or *jouissance*) that is placed in the position of privilege. This means putting enjoyment first and recognizing that it plays a key role in constructing us and our social relations. In the analyst’s discourse enjoyment operates on the subject and makes the subject work for it. In other words, this model recognizes that enjoyment is not just a reflection of who we are and how we are constructed but a key tool in our construction.

Throughout the introduction and first chapter, Bown employs Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of taste and Lacan’s concept of fetishisation in a form of textual analysis from the position of the analyst’s discourse, as opposed to the more familiar university discourse, which he later critiques. He makes the key argument that within the academy, substantive questions regarding the interpretation and use of Deleuze and Guattari, as well as Lyotard, are conflated with concerns over the enjoyment of their texts.

Although Bown at times takes this comparison between each thinker’s theory and the consumption of their ideas and stretches it too far (as he himself admits), the point remains that in an age when to read a text often means to enjoy it ‘in accordance with existing and approved thought’, doing a text justice often means reading it against the grain of its enjoyment, perhaps, as we might suggest, in a manner more ascetic than bombastic. This is no less true of oeuvres such as *Anti-Oedipus* and *Libidinal Economy*, with all their attendant cultural capital, as it is of *Candy Crush Saga*, which is discussed in the next chapter.

This argument raises a question that Bown raises subtly and deftly throughout the rest of the book- should one also read *Enjoying It* against the grain of its enjoyment? In doing so, perhaps the first chapter would be a good place to start. Here we find that the observations concerning how cultural capital that intervenes between a book’s content and the enjoyment of reading such a book could just as easily be applied to a range of figures in philosophy other than Deleuze, Guattari and Lyotard- Žižek, Heidegger, and Butler to name but a few. We can speculate that these figures were picked for the uneasy manner in which the structuralist approach of *Enjoying It* relates to the more post-structuralist approach of these particular thinkers, which Bown playfully undermines.

Lyotard’s position, for example, aims at mapping the links between moments of enjoyment and the stable structural framework in which we experience them, in order to transcend this framework. In contrast, Bown appears to regard enjoyment as bound to the structures within which it is experienced. Paraphrasing Žižek, he states that “it is often when we think we are outside of ideology that it operates most powerfully on us”, an idea that carries

significant import throughout the rest of the book. In this light, Bown's reception of Lyotard is neither an interpretation nor a critique, and in doing so he leaves unresolved a question that resonates throughout the rest of the book as well as the critical works he adopts- how does one talk about a text other than by addressing what the text is about?

This question is of no little import to critical theory and to understand the significance of Bown's approach to it, a comparison to a polemic from a different era proves illustrious. Susan Sontag's 1966 essay *Against Interpretation* critiques the manner in which the dominant heuristic paradigms of the day, rather than allowing the audience to approach the text, instead distanced the audience from it. It set the stage for further works in which Sontag critiqued the way consumer culture constructs an illusory layer of experience that alienates the subject from their real existing material conditions and the role of the text within them.

As is clear from the title, *Against Interpretation* sets out to expose the reactionary nature of the academy's tendency towards interpretation, in particular the way it prioritised the search for a deeper meaning above any concern for a text's sensory, pictorial qualities. Sontag took the side of texts that, instead of inviting interpretation and with it the attention of the artistic establishment, adopt an anti-symbolic quality as a kind of flight from interpretation.

The essay was a timely critique on the contemporary state of the artistic establishment, and its regression as a symptom of a certain crisis within modernity that plagues us to this day, which Sontag characterises in openly Benjaminian terms.

Think of the sheer multiplication of works of art available to every one of us, superadded to the conflicting tastes and odors and sights of the urban environment that bombard our senses. Ours is a culture based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience.

Despite the piercing accuracy of the essay in its time, its effect is limited for the present age, where one is faced not only with the overproduction of culture as a result of new technological mediums, but furthermore with the very overproduction of interpretation that Sontag warned about. This is a reflection of the accelerated consumer culture that Sontag was concerned with, and it also points to a much broader symptom which *Enjoying It* takes as its point of departure- that the dominant cultural injunction of modern capitalism is to enjoy.

Indeed, Sontag's closing call to arms that 'in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art' is stripped of its radicality in an age when those

erotics form part of a currency of enjoyment flexible enough to ensure that consumers can enjoy virtually anything, ideology's answer to the problem of overproduction. Interpretation is not so much the dominant paradigm here as a supplement to this cultural capital, so deeply embedded within both our university cultures and our post-modern cultural modalities that many of our most popular texts already contain their own reception. This feature of popular texts that Bown illustrates almost amounts to an ideological closure, whereby the further one delves into such texts, the more one finds little more than "a medley of different forms of enjoyment" that drew one to it in the first place. Whereas Sontag was concerned about the value of the text, for Bown, what is at stake here, and the central cog within this economy that he seeks to problematise, is the subject itself, *qua* capitalist subject. *Enjoying It* contains an analogue to Sontag's Benjaminian passage, and here the victim of the crisis within modernity is the subject itself-

For Walter Benjamin, distraction is not simply a matter of a deficit of attention which distracts from an otherwise stable reality, but instead implies a scattering or dispersion, which he sees as constitutive of modern mass culture...Benjamin explains how the individual is bombarded with signs so that no coherent reality can be found; the individual self and its reality become fragmented and scattered because there is so much distraction that there is no normality left to be distracted from.

This poses a challenge for the subject, who must respond to this myriad of signs and continue functioning in a world where they are overdetermined. Ideology provides an answer, by creating a semblance of coherent reality, and of coherent selfhood, out of moments of enjoyment. Enjoyment allows the subject to identify with particular objects and experiences which in the course of their lives come stand for the symbolic order that determines them and their social world. This is the substance of the second chapter of *Enjoying It*, which would later be turned into [a highly enjoyable webisode on Wisecrack](#). This thought-provoking chapter best exemplifies the innovation of Bown's project, and his vision of a new "Enjoyment Studies". To quote a wonderfully dialectical passage, Bown's argument outlines how it is not the case that we

truly desire to play Candy Crush but unfortunately have to work, but rather that we feel the need for distraction only when we are working, to re-enforce the sense (increasingly lost) that our work has coherent order and value compared to these activities. A few

minutes on the website Distractify, and we can return to work and feel like we're doing something. Without the distractions, work satisfaction would massively decrease. Or rather, organized dissatisfaction would likely increase, as people would be forced to increasingly confront their alienation rather than distracting themselves from it.

How can one begin to disentangle this ideological knot, and find a stable position of critique, if not resistance? Bown's answer in his third chapter is to assume the discourse of the analyst and approach our social constitution from the perspective of *jouissance*. *Jouissance* is a Lacanian represents an excess of enjoyment that manifests itself in seemingly useless behaviour, when ideology's effect on the enjoying subject goes beyond the possibility of being channelled into a productive capacity. From the perspective of the analyst's discourse, at the moment of *jouissance* the subject externalises the forces of their social constitution at their most elementary level, in a manner that cannot be incorporated by the symbolic order, thereby allowing this moment to function as a window for their social constitution, and one especially fitting for the age of enjoyment.

Enjoying It describes the usefulness of exploring *jouissance* within texts made for popular consumption in de-naturalising our experience of enjoyment from its presumed roots in the authentic core of our selves. This process has a psychoanalytic analogue- that of transference. In exposing the root of the subject's pathological tendencies, the analyst will direct them to enact these tendencies upon a figure that is not normally the target of them, in most cases the analyst themselves. This provides a new outlet for the symptom, allowing the subject to detach themselves from the symptom and for treatment to progress. This explains why a crucial part of Bown's argument is to problematise the way we consume popular texts, to see them as more than inert forms of "rational recreation". On one hand, he locates them within a structural understanding of ideology, and on the other he describes how each text challenges its locus within this structure.

Indeed, Bown's central thesis is that it is in popular texts, as the primary sites of popular enjoyment, and as objects of study largely neglected by the academy, that we can observe our social constitution in a manner external to us. *Jouissance*, as it turns out, is hiding in plain sight, laid in swathes across the sardonic parody of *Gangnam Style*, the self-parodying pop song par excellence which Bown gives the critical treatment it deserves. And in *Game of Thrones*, Bown finds a text charged with much more than its own reception; a fitting stimulus for a meditation on *jouissance*.

The casual reader would not be mistaken in observing that this section of the book is the most theory-laden, while also having no clear object nor conclusion in its deconstruction of the text. What Bown is attempting to do, as Sontag did, is to address the question of how to talk about a text other than by addressing what the text is about. *Enjoying It* provides an answer in a way that delivers a productive structural critique of modern ideology- by directing its attention to how the text is enjoyed. Bown's analysis of *Game of Thrones* acts as a counterpoint to those heuristic paradigms, prevalent across the academy, which he critiques throughout the third chapter. The perspective of *jouissance* gives him a way out of this dogmatic focus on interpretation that on one hand strengthens the cognitive closure of the academy and on the other adds to the cultural capital these texts accumulate.

Thus, in their own ways, both thinkers take issue with the academy and the manner it takes for granted the function of enjoyment. As outlined in *Enjoying It*, under the Lacanian discursive framework, for knowledge to function as the handmaiden of power, it must in turn make enjoyment work for it. Wherever the academy operates within the interpretive paradigms of knowledge, stitching a fragmented social world into a false coherence, it will be re-incorporated into this hegemonic role.

Enjoying It seeks through form and content to untangle itself out of this ideological bind and provide a starting point for what it terms "Enjoyment Studies", which is no less than a study of modern ideology and the subjectivities it produces, and perhaps Bown's answer to Sontag's call for an "erotics of art". Although Bown's *Everyday Analysis* project was discontinued earlier this year, one can only hope that in an age where propaganda is set to become more prolific, so will such insightful studies of popular culture.